

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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On Wednesday June 28, 1865, the newspaper *Alexandria Louisiana Democrat* contained the following notice:

The Steamer **E.F. Dix** on her upward trip was sunk on the wreck of the ironclad Eastport, near Montgomery, and, as we learn, a total loss. No lives were lost.

Alexandria, located in central Louisiana, was one of the principal port towns on the Red River, the most important avenue of steamboat commerce in central and northwestern Louisiana and northeast Texas. This brief notice in the *Louisiana Democrat* provides information on two of the many historic vessels known to have been wrecked and lost on Red River (Pearson and Wells 1999). The sidewheel steamboat *E.F. Dix*, officially known as the *Ed. F. Dix*, was steaming upriver to Shreveport with a load of United States government stores and supplies and Federal cavalry troops, destined for service in northwestern Louisiana and east Texas. The Civil War had officially ended at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, less than three months earlier, but a number of Confederate units had broken away from the official forces and had gathered in Texas, refusing to surrender. Many had crossed the border into Mexico, and the Federal government feared they would join with the French under Ferdinand Maximilian Joseph, the Austrian archduke who had become emperor of

Mexico. To combat these renegade Confederate forces, General Ulysses S. Grant ordered a large force of Union troops to Texas under the command of Major General Philip H. Sheridan (Gibson and Gibson 1995b:510). Most of the Federal forces sent to Texas went on ship by way of the Gulf of Mexico, but some traveled by steamer up the Red River. Troops going up the Red River consisted of two columns of cavalry; one comprised of 5,000 troopers under the command of Major General Wesley Merritt and the other of about 4,500 men led by Major General George A. Custer. Both forces were to travel by steamboat up Red River, one to Alexandria and the other to Shreveport, Louisiana, where they would disembark to march overland into east Texas (Gibson and Gibson 1995b:511).

A number of steamboats were hurriedly contracted or seized in New Orleans by the U.S. Army Quartermaster Department in May and June of 1865 to carry the Texas-bound cavalry and their supplies. The *Ed. F. Dix* was one of these steamers. The exact date of the *Dix's* departure for Red River is unknown, but she hit the wreck of the *Eastport* and sank on June 23 (National Archives, Record Group [RG] 217, File E-653, n.d.).

The “ironclad Eastport,” the other boat mentioned in the *Louisiana Democrat*, is much better known than is the *Ed. F. Dix*. The *Eastport* was one of the many Union gunboats operating on the Mississippi River and its tributaries during the Civil War. In

fact, early in the war, the ironclad *Eastport* had served as the flagship of the western river fleet. On the afternoon of April 26, 1864, Lieutenant Commander Samuel Leydard Phelps of the United States Navy lighted a charge of 3,000 pounds of black powder and blew up the 280-ft-long *Eastport* where she was fast aground in the Red River. The explosion set the boat on fire as she rested on the bottom of the Red, just below the small river town of Montgomery, Louisiana, about 20 miles upriver of Alexandria. The *Eastport*, a sidewheel steamer that had been converted to an ironclad gunboat by the Union, was the largest member of a flotilla of Federal ships that steamed up Red River in the spring of 1864. Commanded by Admiral David Dixon Porter, this fleet was part of a contingent of land and water forces moving up the Red intending to strike a blow at Texas. The ill-fated expedition was forced to turn back by Confederate troops and by low water on the river before reaching their objective and the *Eastport*, damaged by a Confederate torpedo during the retreat downstream, had run aground and could not be gotten off. Lieutenant Commander Phelps, commander of the *Eastport*, destroyed his ship to keep her out of Confederate hands. Her wreck still presented a hazard on the river one year later when struck by the unlucky *Ed. F. Dix*.

The local newspapers provide little additional information on the loss of the *Dix*, not surprising considering the turmoil and disruption the region was undergoing at the end of the war. Because she was an important warship, official documentation about the loss of the *Eastport* in 1864, as well as about her career as a United States vessel, is fairly extensive. Thus, while the destruction of the *Eastport* was recorded and generally remembered, the specifics of where she sank as well as the events of the loss of the *Ed. F. Dix*, were largely forgotten. Over time, the remains of the two boats were deeply buried by silt and sand as the Red River shifted its course across the wrecks.

One hundred and thirty years after the *Eastport* was lost an attempt was made to find her remains. This search, undertaken by the Vicksburg District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), relied on historical sources, geomorphic reconstruction of past Red River courses, remote-sensing survey, and geological coring (Birchett and Pearson 1995). In 1992, the remains of a vessel or vessels, thought to be the *Eastport* and/or the *Ed. F. Dix*, were discovered deeply buried adjacent to the Red River just over a mile below the town of Montgomery (Albertson and

Hennington 1992). The search for the *Eastport* represented one element in a program of cultural resources investigations conducted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in response to their development of navigation on the Red River. The suspected location of the wreck fell within Pool Number 3, one of several navigation pools being formed along the Red River Waterway to provide commercial navigation to Shreveport, Louisiana. As part of its compliance with pertinent Federal and state rules and regulations, the Vicksburg District developed plans to locate the wreck of the *Eastport* and assess any remains that might exist. The wreck of the *Eastport*, if it existed, would represent a unique and significant cultural resource, worthy of discovery and examination. At the initiation of this search, only the better known of the two boats, the *Eastport*, was of interest. It was only after research on the *Eastport* was begun that the accounts of the loss of the *Ed. F. Dix* came to light.

The conduct and results of the search for the *Eastport* and *Ed. F. Dix* are reported in a study by Coastal Environments, Inc., (Birchett and Pearson 1995) and in a report of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Waterways Experiment Station (Albertson and Hennington 1992). The search for and, ultimately, the successful discovery of the two boats, involved three phases of investigation: 1) an initial reconnaissance search using remote-sensing equipment; 2) a second phase using drilling equipment to confirm the presence of buried boat structure; and 3) a detailed magnetometer and topographic mapping of the wreck area to provide a basis for proceeding with identification and evaluation of the wreckage for National Register eligibility. In addition, historical research on the *Eastport* and her activities and loss during the 1864 Red River Campaign was conducted. This historical information was particularly important in identifying the most probable location of the wreck and in narrowing down the area of search so that remote-sensing techniques could pinpoint the wreck site. The third phase of work, the magnetometer and topographic surveys, was conducted in June 1991 by Coastal Environments, Inc., for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Vicksburg District, pursuant to Delivery Order No. 0005 of Contract DACW38-91-D-0014. The first two phases of work were undertaken by the Corps of Engineers under the direction of one of the authors, Tommy Birchett, at that time an archaeologist with the Vicksburg District, aided by Paul Albertson, a geologist with the Vicksburg District and later the Waterways Experiment Station in Vicksburg.

As reported in Birchett and Pearson (1995) and in Albertson and Hennington (1992), remote-sensing surveys and corings discovered what was almost certainly boat remains buried beneath more than 30 ft of alluvial sediment at the location where the *Eastport* and *Ed. F. Dix* were thought to have been lost. Assigned Louisiana state archaeological site number 16GR33, the presumed wrecks lay immediately adjacent to the east bank of the Red River approximately 1.5 miles down river of the town of Montgomery in Grant Parish, Louisiana. In 1994, the Vicksburg District determined that verification of the identity of these buried vessel remains was required to satisfy their obligations relative to Federal cultural resources regulations. This verification called for physical examination of the buried remains and would represent what is generally considered a Phase II cultural resources undertaking; one intended to assess the significance of an historic property and determine its eligibility for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. At the outset, it was recognized that any archaeological examination to identify and assess the significance of these remains would be a difficult, complex and expensive undertaking. Essentially, such an examination would require a two-stage process, the first of which would be a construction and engineering effort to uncover the deeply buried vessel (or vessels) while the second would be an archaeological endeavor to examine and record the uncovered remains. In 1994, the Vicksburg District contracted with Coastal Environments, Inc., to undertake an archaeological examination of the site (Delivery Order No. 13, Contract DACW38-91-D-0014) designed to verify the identity of the buried boat remains and, to the extent possible, evaluate their significance in terms of criteria established by the National Register of Historic Places. In addition, the Vicksburg District contracted with Dillard Construction Company of Nashville, Tennessee, to conduct the excavations necessary to uncover and expose the buried boat remains.

Details on the uncovering phase undertaken by Dillard Construction Company are provided in a later chapter, but their effort resulted in the excavation of a large, water-filled pit over the location of the buried wrecks. This pit, or the “pool” as it came to be known, measured about 235-ft-square at the top and tapered inward with depth. At a depth of about 32 ft below the ground surface (representing an elevation of 69 ft above sea level [N.G.V.D or Near Gulf Vertical Datum]) these excavations encountered intact boat remains, subsequently identified as the

main deck and hull of the steamboat *Ed. F. Dix*. At this depth, the floor of the pool measured approximately 110-ft-square and all of the subsequent archaeological investigations were conducted within this area. The Dillard Construction Company efforts included not only the excavation of the pit over the wrecks, but, also, the construction of a large containment pond to hold the sediments removed from the pit and the construction and maintenance of a road to the site. Dillard Construction Company began their work at the site with the building of the road in October 1994 and finished the excavation of the pool when they struck the wreck of the *Ed. F. Dix* on April 17, 1995. At the completion of the archaeological examinations at the site, Dillard Construction Company refilled the excavated pit and dismantled the holding pond, essentially returning the locale to its condition prior to the start of the project.

The archaeological examination of the site was initiated on April 16, 1995. This investigation involved diving in the 30-ft-deep pool dug by the Dillard company and excavating and recording the vessel remains found in the bottom. Details on this archaeological work are provided in a later chapter, however, it is noted here that the diving conditions at the site were difficult, to say the least. The large hydraulic dredge used by Dillard Construction Company to uncover the wrecks reached the very highest portion of a wreck, subsequently identified as the *Ed. F. Dix*, at which point excavations were stopped to prevent damage to the remains. Thus, most of the wreck of the *Ed. F. Dix* lay under several more feet of sediment that had to be removed by divers using hand-held venturi dredges. The remains of the *Eastport* were found beneath the hull of the *Ed. F. Dix*, even more deeply buried and much more difficult to reach and uncover using the hand-held dredges. Complicating this was the fact that visibility in the pool was essentially zero and the high suspended particle content of the water limited the usefulness of underwater lights. As a result, all of the archaeological work on the wrecks had to be done by feel. Further, sediments over the wrecks varied from tough, tenacious silty clays which were difficult and time consuming to remove, to fluid sands which flowed into and filled excavation units and presented the danger of collapse. Together, all of these conditions made work on the site difficult and required constant vigilance to insure the safety of divers.

In spite of the great difficulties encountered, portions of the wrecks of the *Ed. F. Dix* and the gun-

boat *Eastport* were cleared and recorded and the identities of the two vessels was confirmed. Despite 131 years of, first exposure to the current of the Red River and later burial by many feet of sediments, the remains of the two boats are in surprisingly good condition. A variety of information on the physical condition and the construction of the two boats was gathered and a small collection of artifacts was recovered. The archaeological examination of the vessels ended on June 13, 1995, after which the large pit was refilled, reburying the two wrecks. This brought to an end a long and involved research effort that combined historical, geological, engineering and archaeological methods and tech-

niques in the successful discovery and identification of the first historic steamboats to be discovered and archaeologically examined on the Red River. The following sections of this report detail the history, the discovery and the archaeological examination of these two unique and significant American vessels.

The Project Area

The remains of the *Ed. F. Dix* and the USS *Eastport* are located immediately adjacent to the east bank of the Red River approximately 1.5 miles below the town of Montgomery, Louisiana (Figure 1-1). As is discussed in greater detail in later sections, at the

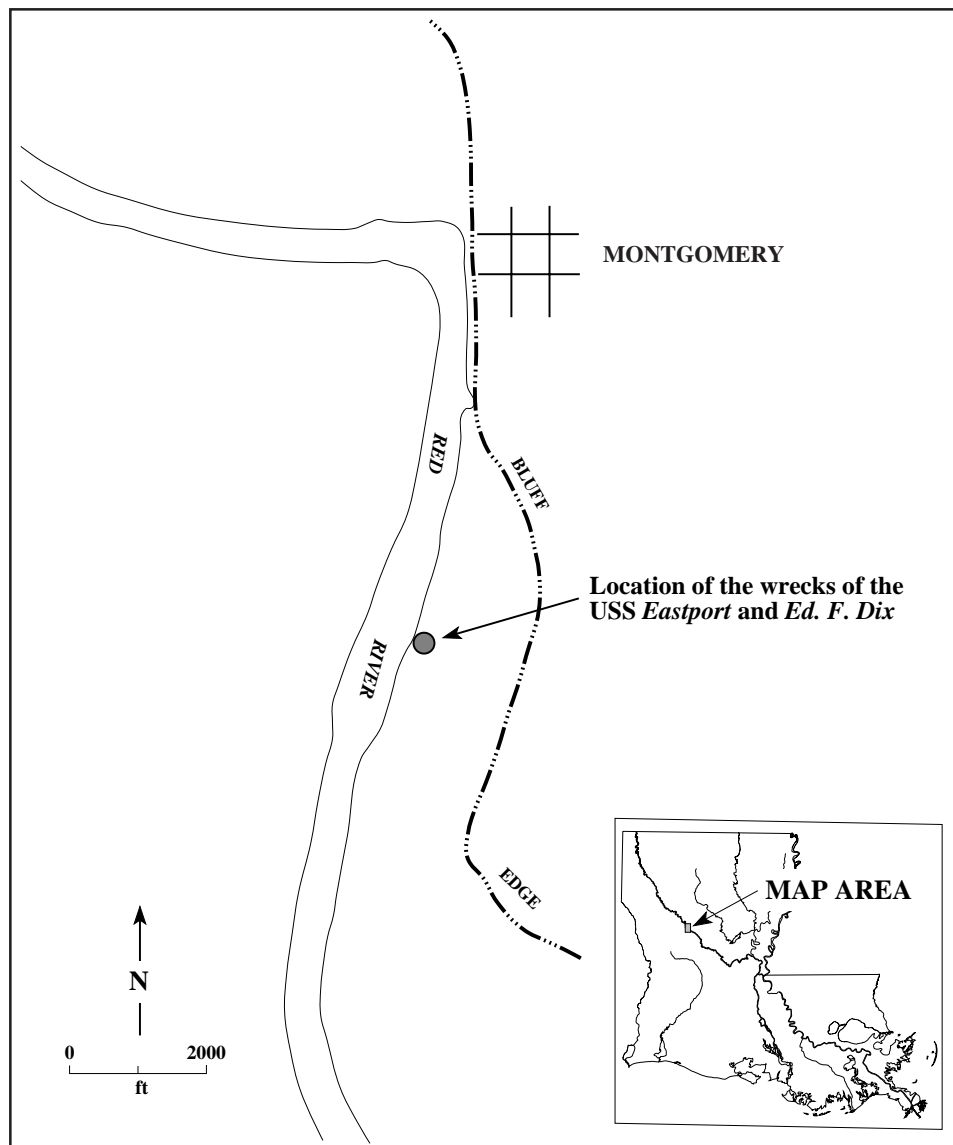


Figure 1-1. The location of the wrecks of the USS *Eastport* and the *Ed. F. Dix*.

time of their sinking the two boats lay in the main channel of the Red, however, the river has since meandered to the west at this point. As the river shifted west, it deposited fluvial sediments on the two wrecks, eventually burying them beneath over 30 ft of alluvium. In 1980, the Corps of Engineers constructed a rock revetment at this location to stabilize the east bank of the river. There is a possibility that the construction of this revetment, which included digging a deep trench adjacent to the bank of the river, impacted the remains of the *Eastport*, but this has never been confirmed (Birchett and Pearson 1995). The land surface at the project area is a relatively flat alluvial floodplain surface that rises to an elevation of about 102 ft above sea level adjacent to the river. This floodplain surface extends eastward away from the river about 750 ft where it impinges on elevated Pleistocene and Tertiary age uplands that border the river valley in this area. Away from the river, this floodplain surface drops slightly in elevation and several undulations are apparent on the surface between the river and the uplands which represent ridge and swale features and, possibly, relict channel features of the Red River. Except for the area closest to the river, much of this floodplain surface is low-lying and wet. At the start of the project, vegetation in this low area consisted primarily of

wet-tolerant and backswamp species. However, the excavation of the pool and the construction of the holding pond resulted in the clearing of most the vegetation between the river and the uplands in the area around the two wrecks.

Organization of the Report

Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive discussion of the history of the USS *Eastport* from her construction and initial use as a packet steamer on the Tennessee, Ohio and Mississippi rivers through her destruction on Red River. Particular attention is paid to the Civil War era and the events relating to the Red River Campaign and the loss of the *Eastport*. Chapter 3 provides a similar discussion on the history of the *Ed. F. Dix* from her early career on the Missouri River to her sinking in June of 1865. Chapter 4 provides information on the archaeological examination of the two wrecks, from their initial discovery to their excavation. Included in Chapter 4 are discussions on the various techniques employed, the results of excavations and the types of artifacts discovered. Finally, Chapter 5 presents a summary of findings, including discussions on the position of the two wrecks as important historical and archaeological properties.